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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a special elementary teacher education program developed at the University of Victoria, British Columbia (Canada). Designed to prepare students for rural teaching positions, this program consists of two years of university level education and two years of practice in a rural community. The educational system in the Province of British Columbia has been characterized by diminishing resources, declining enrollment, and increasing expenditures. Demand for teachers, especially in urban centers, has drastically declined, but vacancies for teachers continue to exist in rural areas. Rural teachers, however, are very mobile, either securing positions in large communities or leaving the classroom to begin new careers. Studies indicate rural teacher mobility is caused by geographic isolation, lack of privacy, and limited professional contacts. Another reason contributing to mobility is a lack of preparation for either the unique learning environment of rural schools or the intimate relationship between rural schools and their local communities. The early field experience described in this paper allows students to study the rural community as a total entity and places the schools in a community context. Required activities include community and classroom projects. Education students trained in this program are expected to provide rural children with a high quality of instruction when they become practicing professional educators. An awareness of life in a rural community will also enable them to adjust more easily to the socio-cultural milieu of a small town. Both these outcomes are expected to reduce the mobility of rural teachers. A chart outlines the chronology of the program. (ALL)

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TRAINING RURAL TEACHERS BY CULTURAL IMMERSION

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TRAINING RURAL TEACHERS BY CULTURAL IMMERSION

Similar to most regions of Canada, as well as many countries of the world, the Province of British Columbia's public education system over the past five years has been characterized by diminishing resources, a declining student population, and increasing expenditures. The demand for teachers has drastically declined especially in urban centres and large rural communities which have experienced the full impact of these financial, demographic and inflationary forces. In fact, many of the larger school districts reduced their teaching force as fewer and fewer teachers were needed to staff schools. Recent government policies have subjected districts to further fiscal constraints. Under these conditions, it is doubtful whether many students graduating teacher education programmes, offered by provincial universities will secure professional positions in large school systems.

Where will these students commence their professional careers? A number of students who only want to reside in urban centres seek employment in other sectors of the economy or undertake training for a different career. The remaining teachers compete for professional appointments in rural areas where vacancies continue to exist.

Over a decade ago, Hartrick, Hills and Wallin (1971) reported that six out of every ten teachers hired in a given year would not be teaching in the same school

district five years later. The sixties and early seventies was an era of high teacher mobility due to a shortage of professionals. Superintendents in many school districts were pleased if they had been able to recruit a sufficient number of teachers when schools opened. Under these circumstances, teachers could easily move from one district to another.

Though the demand for teachers has changed dramatically in recent years, rural teachers continue to be mobile. In a quality of worklife study undertaken by Haughey and Murphy (1982) involving 528 rural teachers, 93 respondents indicated that they did not intend remaining in their present school another year. When asked whether they would be teaching next year, only 20 percent stated that they would be seeking a teaching position in another rural school. Forty-five percent of this group were hoping to secure teaching positions in a large community, the remaining 35 percent indicated that they were going to begin new careers.

Why are rural teachers so mobile? Many factors have been found to account for this phenomenon. Cross, Bandy and Gleadow (1980) reported that geographic isolation, lack of privacy and limited professional contacts were major reasons for the high rate of mobility which characterized rural teachers. More recently, Haughey and Murphy (1980) found that isolation was a primary cause of rural teacher

mobility, a situational factor which was multi-dimensional, consisting of geographic, cultural, social, professional, personal and recreational facets. Another factor, though rarely mentioned, which may contribute to the mobility of rural teachers is that their training did not prepare them adequately for either the unique learning environment of rural schools or the intimate relationship between rural schools and their local communities.

To better prepare students for teaching assignments in rural schools, Cross (1980, 1981, 1982) and associates have designed an elementary teacher preparation programme for prospective rural teachers based on: 1) research undertaken by Cross, Bandy and Gleadow, 2) information on teacher training obtained from New Zealand teachers' colleges; 3) details of teacher training programmes offered by Colleges of Advanced Education in Queensland, Australia; and 4) discussions with members of the Rural Teachers' Association of British Columbia. Research studies undertaken by Cross, Bandy and Gleadow (1980), Bello and Bello (1980), and Haughey and Murphy (1982) served as reference sources for developing learning experiences.

All students admitted into this special teacher education programme will be required to study for two years at the main campus of the University of Victoria or have an equivalent two years of university level education. During this initial phase of their professional training, students

will study a variety of academic and professional subjects to broaden their knowledge base and to gain an awareness of different teaching methods. A significant portion of the third and fourth years of study are completed in rural communities. Extended practica acquaint students with the professional life of a rural teacher and sensitize them to the socio-cultural character of small settlements in remote areas of the province. An early field experience allows students to study the rural community as a total entity and places the schools in community context.

Issues of importance to rural teachers are given special attention in discussions during academic and professional classes in the first term of these senior undergraduate years. The extended field experience undertaken in the second term offers students an opportunity to obtain 'first hand' experiences in the rural setting. While on this immersion teaching practice, the students will be required to 1) become involved in community affairs by completing a community assessment and by producing a community event; 2) prepare a study of the school-community interaction and produce a school event; 3) undertake an indepth analysis of a rural classroom; and 4) produce and teach a specially designed unit of work for a rural class.

The sequence is seen as crucial; community experience first, classroom experience last. Once the student teacher comes in professional contact with the classroom, pupils

and learning presentation become so all encompassing and captivating, that to focus attention on the 'outside' environment of the school becomes literally impossible. Yet most of the studies cited imply that the successful rural teacher is one who understands the rural community and knows how to live in it.

All students will be required to maintain a professional journal of their experiences during the rural practica. The information contained in this document will serve as a base for discussions with faculty members, sponsor teachers, student and colleagues about the concerns which student teachers identify after working in a rural school. Sponsor teachers are expected to play a very important role in assisting students adjust to the demands of teaching in a small rural school. Upon request, these highly qualified professionals will provide students with career counselling and answer questions concerning life as a teacher in a rural community. Through this tutorial procedure, strong professional relationships and bonds of friendship are expected to be established between students and sponsor teachers. Visiting faculty members will assist students improve their teaching techniques, will relate theory to classroom practice and will encourage students to experiment with new instructional material.

At the completion of the fourth year of study, students will be eligible for a provincial teaching

certificate. Though a number of them will seek teaching positions at the end of the fourth year, the many will want to satisfy the requirements for a Bachelor of Education degree. These students will be required to complete a fifth year of study at the main campus. The academic and professional courses offered in this final year of professional studies will be expected to nurture their personal growth and to enhance their professional development. Students will be encouraged, whenever possible, to relate their extended field experiences to the theories and concepts discussed in class.

The proposed teacher education programme discussed in this brief report will be unique in Canada in that students as part of their studies, will reside for a significant period in their senior years of study in a rural setting. After such an extended teaching practica, these students will possess a greater appreciation of what it means to be a rural teacher than their peers who complete traditional teacher education programmes. By possessing this knowledge, these students will undoubtedly provide rural children with a high quality of instruction when they become practicing professional educators. Similarly, an awareness of life in a rural community will enable them to more easily adjust to the socio-cultural milieu of a small town. Both these outcomes may have a substantive impact on reducing the mobility of rural teachers.

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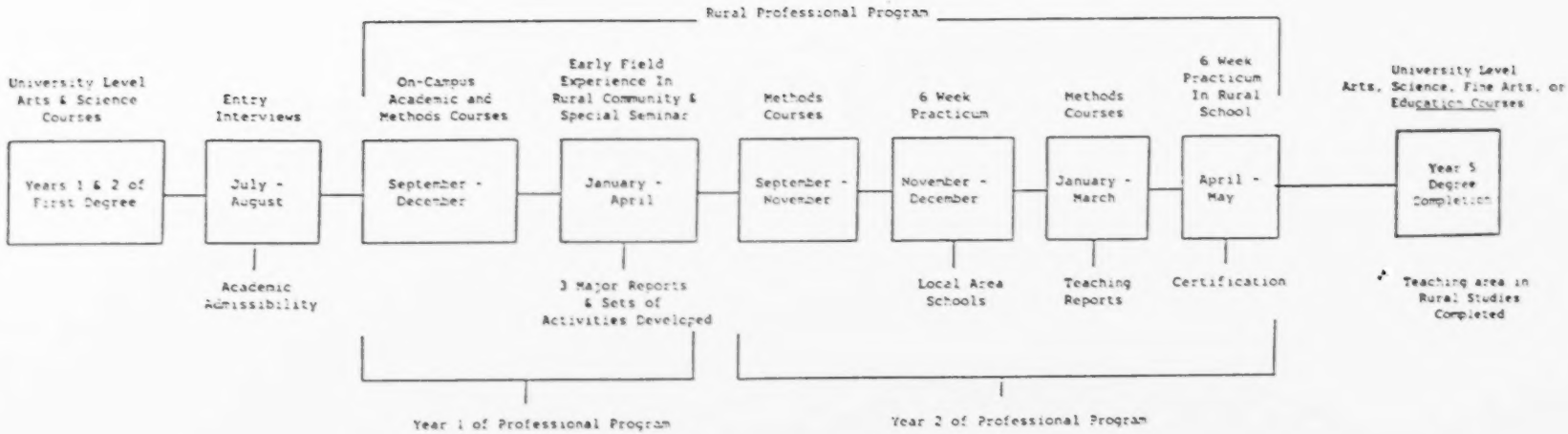
Rural Professional Program
University Level Arts & Science Courses
Entry Interviews
On-Campus Academic and Methods Courses
Early Field Experience In Rural Community & Special Seminar
Methods Courses
6 Week Practicum
Methods Courses
6 Week Practicum In Rural School
University Level Arts, Science, Fine Arts, or Education Courses
Years 1 & 2 of First Degree
July - August
September - December
January - April
September - November
November - December
January - March
April - May
Year 5 Degree Completion
Academic Admissibility
3 Major Reports & Sets of Activities Developed
Local Area Schools
Teaching Reports
Certification
Teaching Area in Rural Studies Completed
Year 1 of Professional Program
Year 2 of Professional Program

Figure 1: The Proposed Rural Elementary Teacher Preparation Programme

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Additional Information

Additional information regarding this proposed special teacher training programme may be obtained from:

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